

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to [news@portlandobserver.com](mailto:news@portlandobserver.com).

# OPINION

## Death and Dying as a Black Studies Professor

### The toxicity of racism at Portland State

BY ETHAN JOHNSON

While some might think it hyperbole to begin a paper claiming a relationship between death and dying and being a tenured professor at



a large public university, I think it is a valid claim. It is just a fact that many of the Black people, most of them men and some of whom were and are my friends, at Portland State are sick, dying or dead.

After the PSU Board of Trustees, an unelected group of overwhelmingly white men, voted to arm PSU security, the first person campus police shot and killed was Jason Washington, a Black person, married and a father of two. A fight broke out in front of a bar on campus and he was carrying a gun which he was permitted to carry. It fell out in the fight and when he tried to grab it the cops shot and killed him. As is usually the case, the rule of impunity prevailed here and no one was held accountable in any substantive way. The struggle against arming the police force was strong and overwhelmingly students and faculty expressed they did not want an armed police force on campus. We already have one, the Portland Police Bureau, who have a long history of killing Black and poor people with impunity.

I have taught in the Black Studies Department for 15 years at PSU. One of the courses I teach is called Racism. For years I have used a video in this class called Unnatural Causes, which has a section in it called "When the Bough Breaks." This part of the documentary makes the case that racism not only maintains inequality across institutions, it also makes us sick. The literature is well established here with many peer reviewed articles demonstrating how the stress of daily racism gets into our bodies and over works us causing break-

downs in our hearts, reproductive systems and other areas of our bodies. I remember one young Black woman student realizing after seeing the video that if she wanted to have children she should have them young because if she did not, the compounded stress of racism on her reproductive system could very likely endanger her child. This is premeditated murder.

Mainstream white society has the facts to show that racism makes us sick and causes premature death, but does nothing to change the conditions. A very frustrating part about this is we Black people can sometimes and often do blame ourselves for our failing physical and/or mental health. However, as

*I argue, as Vargas does, that the immediate death by police/vigilantes and/or the slow death by sickness and stress are interconnected. Anti-Black racism justifies them as the fault of Black people who are deemed criminal, lazy and without restraint.*

Joao Acosta Vargas shows in his article "The Liberation Imperative of Black Genocide," it is society built on white supremacy and anti-blackness that must be held accountable.

Jason Washington's death is, as are the hundreds of others that happen each year at the hands of the police, understood among many Black people as the state's intent to keep Black people down. More subtle forms, while not always causing death, do cause suffering and remain much easier for mainstream/white society to exculpate themselves from and us to blame ourselves for or to just remain confused.

I argue, as Vargas does, that the immediate death by police/vigilantes and/or the slow death by sickness and stress are interconnected. Anti-Black racism justifies them as the fault of Black people who are deemed criminal, lazy and without restraint.

When I first arrived to PSU, I was hired to fill the position of a young Black man from South Africa. As I understood it, he was popular among his students. The then chair of the Black Studies Department did not recommend him for tenure. When I walked into his office, which became mine, what I could not take my eyes off of was a plaster sculpture of a white man almost life size with a removable stick up his butt. I didn't know what to think when I saw this and it quickly disappeared. In hindsight, what it probably indicated was his upfront resistance to anti-Black racism, which was why he was popular with his students. The chair of the department who did not support his tenure and rarely uttered the

struggle just to walk the streets of Portland. The Portland metro area is the whitest large city in America, which is no accident. Oregon is the only state in the Union to have in its original constitution of 1857 an exclusion clause that made it illegal for Black and other people of color to live here. Today, Oregon has the highest pushout/dropout rate in the country for Black high school students, most of whom live in the Portland area. Furthermore, the homicide and incarceration rates in the Portland area are higher than national averages for Black people. The original state constitution of exclusion helped pave the way for a white homeland, and while removed from the constitution in 1926, the injustice is nevertheless

is much whiter than Portland, also has one of the most accessible voting processes in the country. However, as I and others have pointed out these policies are due to the city and state being so white. Without a large non-white population, struggles over transportation, housing, schools, voting and other public services don't confront resistance because these institutions generally serve the majority white population. White middle-class people in particular in the Portland area don't have to share buses and housing with Black people because of our small numbers, so they fund their public transportation system, libraries and schools.

Someone who I considered my friend used to be the coordinator for what is called the Multicultural Center at PSU. Much of the student activities on campus that serve non-white students come out of this center. An African, he was very supportive of the Black Studies Department. He regularly made his space available for the department to conduct what we call the Black Bag Speaker Series. This event invites people and organizations doing work that focuses on Black life locally and nationally to share their efforts with students and faculty. The topics include police brutality, art, music, literature, health, gender, immigration, sexuality and many other issues. It was the only Black-centered forum on campus, but never received institutional funding from PSU. My friend collaborated with me often to share expenses to help run the event. My friend also supported the Muslim students on campus for which I am sure many were not happy. He opened the Multicultural Center's doors to the Muslim students on campus to hold prayer in the main room of the center on Fridays. I remember

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

### Letter to the Editor

## On Post Office Jobs

Thanks for printing Keith Combs commentary ("Honor Veterans and Protect the Postal Service", Nov. 13 issue). Another critical service that the USPS provides veterans is delivery of pharmaceuticals. The Veterans Administration ships all their medications through the postal service. And finally, your readers should know that the postal service has provided a pathway to living wage jobs for hundreds of thousands of African Americans (21% of the USPS workforce), many of them veterans.

*Jamie Partridge, retired letter carrier from northeast Portland*

# JESUS

## Coming Again

### SOON!!



*"Dear G-d, Please forgive ALL my sins. I accept Jesus into my heart as my Lord and Savior, Amen"*

JesusIsComingAgain@usa.com  
PO Box 231023, Tigard OR 97281